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United Nations Peacekeeping Efforts: Middle East

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UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING EFFORTS: MIDDLE EAST

Speculation over four-power talks on the Middle East and reversal by the Soviets of their usual opposition to UN peacekeeping operations have focused attention on the possible use of peacekeeping forces in the Middle East as part of a settlement. In the past the United Nations has been involved in two different types of peacekeeping operations in the Middle East. The small Mixed Armistice Commissions (MACs) assigned to each border have helped to cool minor border problems, but have been unable to prevent infiltration of Arab terrorists into Israeli territory or subsequent Israeli retaliation. The United Nations Emergency Force in the Middle East (UNEF), on the other hand, was very effective in preventing clashes between Egyptian and Israeli forces, and its withdrawal by Secretary General Thant at Egypt's request was considered to be a major factor in clearing the way for the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967.

Hostility toward UN operations in the area especially by the Israelis and occasionally by the Arabs does not augur well for the use of UN peacekeeping forces in the future. Nevertheless, it is difficult to envision any "settlement" which does not involve some kind of a UN presence.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations may be on the verge of a new era in conducting its peacekeeping functions in the Middle East. Since the war of June, 1967, efforts to bring about peace in the area have centered primarily in the UN. To facilitate a settlement, the Security Council in November 1967 established a mission headed by Gunnar Jarring, Sweden's ambassador to Moscow. Jarring has spent the intervening months in a series of frustrating, off-again on-again talks with representatives of the states involved in the dispute. Now that his mission has lost whatever momentum it may have had, the idea advanced by the French for Big Four consultations on a settlement of the Middle East crisis has grown in favor. Any settlement, however, will probably still involve the UN, and particularly the Security Council.

In general, UN peacekeeping forces are being considered for two purposes. First, it has been suggested that a buffer UN military force along

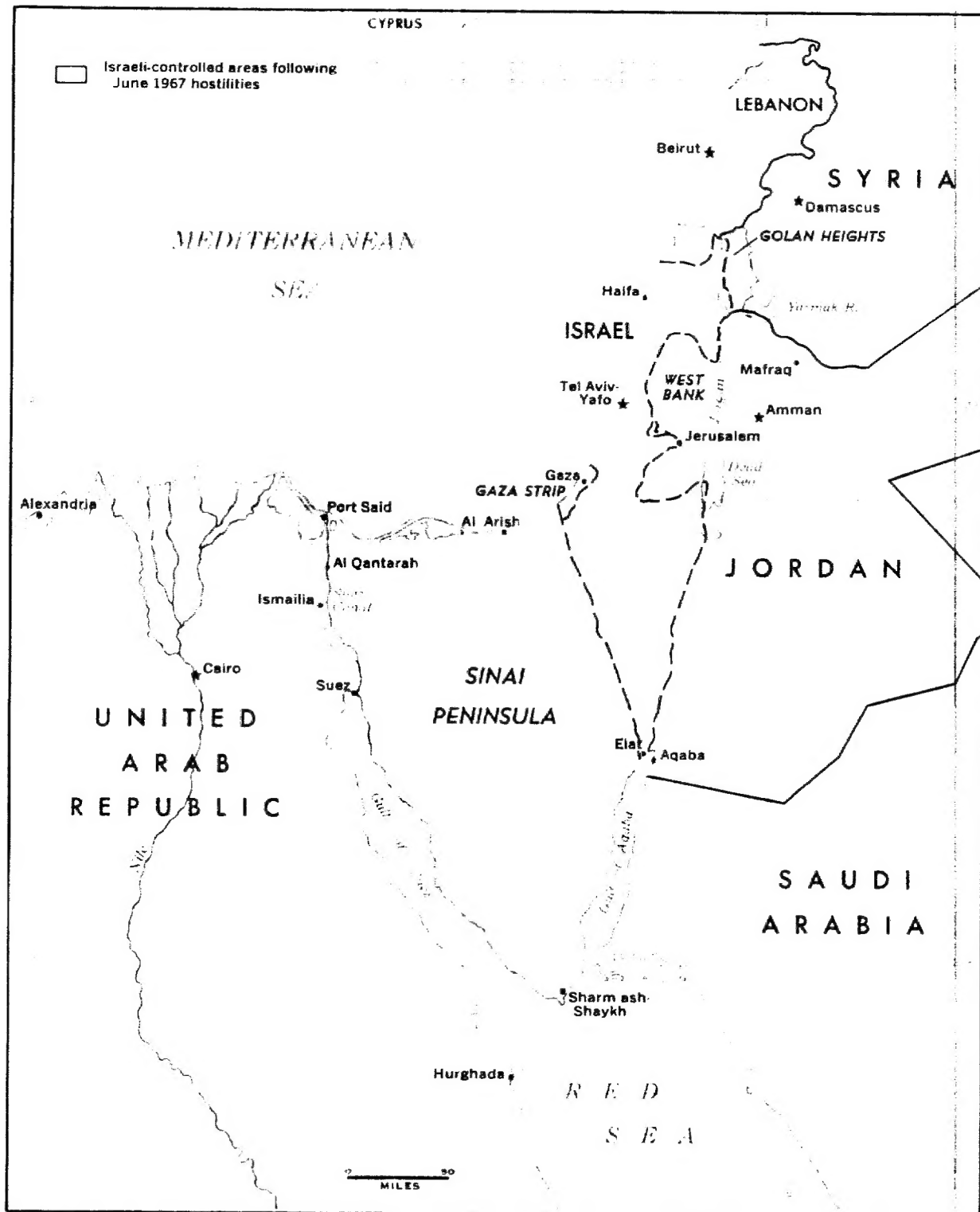
the lines of UNEF be interposed between the Israeli and Egyptian forces at Gaza and in the Sinai, to insulate the Israelis as they withdraw. This suggestion is tied to the dispute concerning whether Sinai is to be demilitarized. The Egyptians appear to prefer a demilitarized strip on each side of the Israeli-Egyptian border, whereas the Israelis demand that the whole of the peninsula be free of Egyptian military presence. The eventual resolution of this point would have strong bearing on how any UN force would be used for the purpose described.

Second, there is interest in a UN presence, patterned perhaps on the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization and the MACs, in such strategic areas as borders, the Suez Canal, and Sharm ash-Shaykh, to discourage incidents and to guarantee freedom of navigation.

UNTSO AND THE MACS

The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was created by the Security

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Council in 1948 to supervise the truce it had ordered in Palestine. Each of the four General Armistice Agreements created a Mixed Armistice Commission (MAC) to supervise enforcement of each armistice. The bulk of UNTSO's military observers are assigned to the MACs; the headquarters in Jerusalem is in charge of the over-all UNTSO operation and is in direct contact with UN headquarters in New York. Observers are assigned to man observation posts and to investigate incidents along the demarcation line when requested. The observers' reports normally go to the MAC through its chairman, but may also be used by the UNTSO chief of staff as the basis for a report to the UN secretary general and to the Security Council.

Although UNTSO and the MACs have been able to solve some minor border problems, they have never been able to deal with Arab terrorist intrusions—either before or after the 1967 war—along the cease-fire lines and with the subsequent Israeli retaliations. It is, however, generally believed that the MACs have contributed to some degree to stability on the borders.

Since the 1967 war, Israel has held that the General Armistice Agreements are no longer valid and that the MACs as a consequence, no longer exist. The Israelis claim that the armistice lines created in 1949 have been superseded by the present cease-fire lines. In Israeli eyes, therefore, the chief UN representative in the area, Norway's General Odd Bull, is not the chief UN truce observer but the chief UN cease-fire observer.

UN observers function on the Golan Heights line and along the Suez Canal. They do not function on the Jordan River because Jordan has refused to allow their presence, fearful of any act that would give that line any aspect of permanency. Israel does not allow UN observers on the Israeli side of the Lebanese border because Lebanon continues to insist that an armistice, rather than a cease-fire is in effect.

Before the Israeli boycott in 1967, the Israeli-Lebanese Mixed Armistice Commission (ILMAC) was the most effective, by far, of all the MACs. In justifying their claim that the 1949 General Armistice Agreements (GAA) and therefore ILMAC are no longer in existence, the Israelis assert that Lebanon declared war on Israel in June 1967, thus abrogating the GAA.

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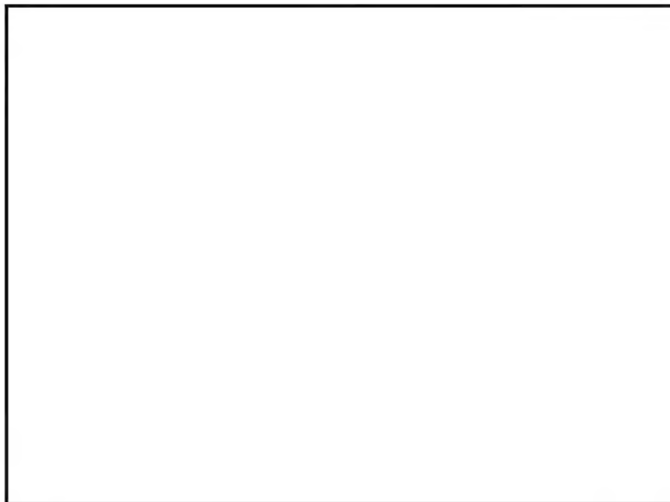
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UNEF

The United Nations Emergency Force in the Middle East (UNEF), created at the request of the UN General Assembly following the 1956 Arab-Israeli war, was one of the most effective of any of the UN peacekeeping operations. Security Council authorization of UNEF was prevented by the veto of France and the United Kingdom, who were involved in the war. The UN as a matter of practice—largely due to Secretary General Hammarskjöld's strong reluctance to use Big-Four Power troops in any UN peacekeeping operations—called on the military resources of the smaller UN members to make up the force.

Although initially formed to supervise the cease-fire in Suez and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Egyptian territory, UNEF moved into the Gaza strip, stationing itself along the Armistice Demarcation Line and also at Sharm ash-Shaykh and along the Israeli-Egyptian frontier between the Gaza Strip and the Gulf of Aqaba. In all, with a full complement of about 6,000 men, UNEF was responsible for 170 miles of land frontier and 117 miles of sea coast. The first UN peacekeeping force to be fully armed, UNEF was more than an observer mission in that its principal task was to maintain peace along the frontier by

preventing or detecting infiltration. The force, however, had “no military functions exceeding those necessary to secure peaceful conditions.” UNEF operated only on the Egyptian side of the frontier because it could only be stationed in national territory with the consent of that state and Israel refused to give its consent.

As a result of mounting criticism from some members during the early 1960s, the UN was forced to cut down on its operating expenditures for UNEF. The force was ultimately reduced to half its original strength, and in 1966, it was reorganized in an economy move. Despite its reduced strength, UNEF on the whole did a commendable job patrolling the frontier and keeping incidents to a minimum. Actually the number of incidents with which UNEF had to deal steadily declined from an average of 205 a year in 1957-60 to 4 in 1965-66.

In mid-May, 1967, stimulated by false Soviet allegations of an imminent Israeli assault on Syria, Egypt began extensive redeployment of military units into Sinai. On 16 May the Egyptians asked the UNEF commander to withdraw from observation posts at Sharm ash-Shaykh.

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On 22 May Egyptian forces took over the UNEF observation post at Sharm ash-Shaykh, and the Egyptian Government announced that it

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would prevent Israeli ships and other ships carrying strategic cargoes to Israel from passing through the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba.

A number of countries, including the US, have commented that the secretary general's action had been precipitate, and that the removal of the force should not have resulted from a unilateral decision of the host government. It was

agreements between the great powers in the UN and the attitudes of these countries toward peacekeeping. The Soviet and French use of the so-called "financial veto" of General Assembly supervision of certain past peacekeeping efforts has never been resolved and may have caused the entire peacekeeping function to be placed under exclusive Security Council jurisdiction. The Soviets have generally opposed UN peacekeeping operations in the past, with a few notable exceptions, and have adamantly objected to what they have regarded as General Assembly intrusion into peacekeeping.

Under present circumstances, however, the Soviets have indicated a willingness to have the UN participate in a settlement by furnishing a supervisory force as long as the operation remains under strict Security Council control. In their 30 December "peace plan," the Soviets called for the creation of a UN force to be stationed between Egypt and Israel when the Israelis withdraw to prewar boundaries. Its presence would be by a joint request from Egypt and Israel, or, if Cairo agrees, by the request of Egypt alone. The Soviet "peace plan" also suggests that UN supervisors be so stationed to guarantee navigation through the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba. Recent Soviet interest in UN efforts to agree on terms of reference for a study of past peacekeeping operations, together with representations made by the Soviet officials at the UN that they favor new peacekeeping forces in the Middle East, would seem to indicate that the Soviets really hope to make UN peacekeeping part of a package settlement.

GREAT POWER ATTITUDES TOWARD UN PEACEKEEPING

Any plan to create a new UN peacekeeping force to police the Middle East or to preside over a peace must take into consideration existing dis-

It is unclear what sort of force the Soviets are considering to oversee Sharm ash-Shaykh and the Suez Canal, or to police any demilitarized zones. Because of their restrictive interpretation of the peacekeeping function, the Soviets probably are thinking of a truncated force with

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limited powers under strict Security Council control. Moscow does not envision any direct participation for itself, however, stressing that there should be no contingents from the "Four-Power" nations in any peacekeeping force.

The French have recommended that the UN force either consist wholly of troops contributed by the Big Four or that it be a larger international peacekeeping force with Big Four contributions. The idea apparently originated with De Gaulle, who sees advantages in such an arrangement both to France and to all concerned parties. Participation in a peacekeeping force would guarantee France a role in an area in which the French President is vitally interested and would also enhance French claims to status as a great power. At the same time, De Gaulle reasons that troops of the Big Four, once in position, could not be so easily displaced as was the original UNEF force. If the Security Council rather than the General Assembly established such a force, the juridical position of the troops would be even stronger. Paris is aware that this would be an unprecedented departure from UN policy, that it has a number of obvious drawbacks, and is opposed at present by all the Middle East states involved as well as the UK, the USSR, and the UN Secretariat. The Soviets, opposed to any form of military collaboration with Western powers, would be most reluctant to participate in such an enterprise. They appear to sympathize with Nasir, who is opposed to any great power military presence in the Middle East under UN auspices.

The question of four-power contributions of troops may come up again in the context of Big Four consultations, but with negligible results. The sole advantage of such a scheme would be simpler financial arrangements, inasmuch as each great power presumably would support its own troops. It would be reasonable to assume that a new UN force would draw on troops supplied by

neutral countries. In the past Secretary General Thant, who does not want to use troops from the Big Four, has suggested that raising a force be left to him.

The substance of a Middle East settlement must be worked out before the details of any new peacekeeping mission can be settled. Basic questions must first be answered, such as what role the great powers are to play and how effective Jarring's renewed efforts will be. Until then, the precise procedural aspects of the UN's role will figure only peripherally in efforts to achieve peace.

ATTITUDES OF MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES TOWARD UN PEACEKEEPING

The various positions of the Middle East countries on UN peacekeeping constitute the greatest obstacle to the employment of peacekeeping forces in any settlement. The Israelis have long refused to deal with UN peacekeeping organizations and have obstructed their efforts to investigate border incidents. They have continually claimed that the MACs are ineffective organs and have accused them of a marked lack of consideration for the Israeli position. UNTSO officials, in turn, have accused the Israelis of embarking on a systematic campaign to discredit UNTSO, and continual Israeli hostility to the UN presence in the area has alienated most UN personnel. The Israelis have objected to MAC procedures of investigating incidents and attempting to affix the blame; they have called for the MACs to take steps to prevent future incidents. Prior to the 1967 war Israel refused to discuss the status of demilitarized zones along the Syrian border on the ground that this was sovereign Israeli territory. They also refused to allow Israeli-Syrian Mixed Armistice Commission (ISMAL) representatives to enter the zones.

While relations between the UNTSO and Israel improved somewhat after General Odd Bull

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replaced General Carl von Horn of Sweden as chief of staff in 1963, Israel's hostile attitude toward UN peacekeeping operations in the area remained unchanged. This hostility to UNTSO and UNEF, together with Israel's view that the MACs are now defunct, indicate that the recommendation of a peacekeeping force in the future could be a sticking point with the Israelis. If all other issues in a settlement could be resolved favorably, however, Israel would probably accede to the presence of a new UN force.

Cairo favors implementation of the Security Council's November 1967 resolution under the supervision of the Council and wants Council guarantees of a lasting peace. According to their most recent pronouncements, the Egyptians are willing to have a UNEF-style force stationed between Egyptian and Israeli forces during the initial period of withdrawal, so long as the force has no permanent character. In earlier statements, Nasir indicated that he had no objection to a UN presence on a more-or-less permanent basis. It is not clear whether Egypt would again assent unilaterally to the presence of a UN force in the absence of Israeli acceptance of the force. U Thant has argued against repeating this arrangement. It is possible, however, that Egypt would again approve it, and would probably accept observer teams patterned on UNTSO whether the Israelis did or not.

Jordan and Lebanon, it seems, would not impose particular restrictions on UN peacekeeping options. Jordan would welcome UN ob-

servers, but would probably like them stationed on both sides of the Jordanian-Israeli border.

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Lebanon has also expressed a willingness to increase the number of observers attached to ILMAC, but has stipulated that Israel must agree to accept observers on its side as well. This condition has been rejected by Israel.

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The recent increase in terrorist activity may serve to complicate creation of a new observer force. It can be anticipated that Israel will continue to assert that observers only facilitate Arab irresponsibility in failing to control terrorists. A built-in provision for direct contact between Arabs and Israelis, such as that incorporated into the MACs, is probably an essential feature for Israeli acceptance of observers. Israel can be expected to resist otherwise, but prospects for direct contact, implying recognition of Israel, could be a strong enticement.

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